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Conference report

Advancing humanitarian action: engaging with rising global actors to develop new strategic partnerships

Monday 21 – Tuesday 22 October 2013 | WP1269

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Executive Summary

Changes in the international framework, the greater engagement of rising global actors and the demand to meet persistent and new challenges make an enhanced dialogue and partnership between the heterogeneous set of actors representing today's humanitarian action indispensable. The way humanitarian action is conducted, the structure of traditional mechanisms of coordination, cooperation and funding need re-thinking in order to reflect the complexity of humanitarian engagement on the ground. Here, the transfer of knowledge and experience across the board, the establishment of equal partnerships and the strengthening of sustained dialogue bear the potential of finding solutions for contemporary and future challenges.

Due to the growing number and diversity of actors, aiming to achieve comprehensive consensus might not be the most promising path to design a course of action. Instead, the focus on commonalities and similarities can serve as a starting point for the development of a roadmap for strategic and long-term partnership. To foster understanding, the mutual perceptions of traditional and rising global actors needs to be revised. Traditional humanitarian actors have to be open towards divergent ideas and approaches, while they need to revise the perception of their monopoly over humanitarian principles. Re-emerging donors need to strengthen their commitment and trust in international mechanisms and coordination efforts to achieve greater and effective cooperation. Recognising and using the comparative advantages of rising global actors, such as their cultural and geographical proximity to affected populations, can contribute to the advancement of humanitarian action.

Cooperation between the global and the local level has to be strengthened and the capacity of regional and local organisations enhanced. The notion of capacity building has to be translated into early and long-term commitment. This further needs to take the shape of horizontal partnerships and should be preceded by the assessment of existing local capacities.

Creating new platforms of dialogue, strengthening the exchange in existing fora and enhancing their accessibility are necessary steps to be taken. Openness and commitment to engagement is crucial to supplement existing notions of interoperability and interdependence with greater knowledge about implications for its operationalization.

The context

Humanitarian action is needed now more than ever. The growing number of vulnerable people, the rise in disasters, and the failure to address many fragile states effectively will increase humanitarian needs. While Western-based donors, the United Nations and international non-governmental organisations have a vital role to play, there are significant, and growing, contributions made by emergent or rising powers and the inter-governmental and non-governmental organisations based in these countries. These actors are a complex and diverse group, each donor and humanitarian actor having its unique history and

political, economic and social development.

Against this background, the conference sought to:

- Strengthen mutual understanding among humanitarian actors on matters of policy and practice;
- Broaden common understanding of an effective and complementary humanitarian system, based on shared humanitarian principles, and build support for a multilateral approach from all humanitarian actors,
- creating new partnerships to enhance global effectiveness as well as respecting the diversity of different approaches;
- Encourage more active collaboration in international humanitarian response;
- Encourage increased financial and other contributions to ensure the humanitarian community is able to respond promptly and effectively to humanitarian need.

Trends and challenges:

Sources of misunderstanding

Misleading terminology

1. The current terminology applied to describe the heterogeneous set of actors is often perceived as a neglect of their history and status. Instead of using the terms '*emerging actors*' it is therefore recommended to apply the term '*re-emerging actor*', '*non-DAC donor*' or '*rising global actor*'. The latter term furthermore implies the long-lasting engagement of actors on the local and regional level and their contemporary increasing involvement into the international arena. Moreover, the concept of the set of rising global actors as a homogenous entity needs to be challenged and greater emphasis paid to the particularities and position of each individual actor.
2. Furthermore, emphasis is laid on the term *partnership* to describe the relationship between donor and recipient and to denote the commonality and equality of the undertaking. Instead of using geographical commonality in describing south-south cooperation, the term *horizontal cooperation* is able to capture the idea of equal partnership more adequately.
3. Another contribution to the differentiation of existing terminology is the introduction of the term *social or environmental disaster* replacing the term natural disaster, which can indeed serve as a more accurate description with regard to the reasons that turn a hazard into disaster.

Beyond supplementing traditional assistance

4. Rising global actors do not exclusively aim to supplement the traditional humanitarian aid system, but are instead strengthening and developing their own mechanisms and approaches to humanitarian crisis. The current reluctance to join existing multilateral networks can partly be explained by a lack of inducements, as the joining of existent mechanisms is not perceived to be benefitting the goal of delivering assistance in a timely and cost-effective manner. Current international mechanisms to respond to crisis are often renounced citing bloated bureaucracy, resulting in delayed response and high costs. Rising global actors are reluctant to take part in international coordination mechanisms in order not to compromise the ability to act in a flexible and dynamic manner.

Contesting the monopoly over humanitarian principles

5. The value and significance of the humanitarian principles are widely recognised. While the core principles of humanity and impartiality are accepted as constituting the core of humanitarian action, the principles of neutrality and independence are a matter of perspective. In accordance with the differentiation between the two dimensions of theory and practice, it has become an acknowledged fact that the operationalization of humanitarian principles is a matter of context. It was argued that circumstances

confronted at the local level are too diverse to develop a universal and general approach.

Assessing comparative advantages

Cultural and geographical proximity

6. That context matters has become a reiterated truth. However, traditional humanitarian actors have fallen short in paying adequate attention to culture, traditions and local hierarchies on the ground. Cultural proximity can benefit the purpose of gaining access and ensure a better quality of humanitarian services. However, it should not be assumed that cultural proximity functions per se as a facilitator, as the position of the outsider can be beneficial especially in intra-state armed conflicts. In some contexts cultural proximity can nonetheless be the necessary factor in creating trust and enable organisations to access populations, while traditional humanitarian agencies are denied on grounds of suspicion. Using this comparative advantage can facilitate greater access, and exploring the relationship of cultural proximity and humanitarian action can be helpful in refining aid programmes. However, context remains the most important thread delineating whether or not cultural proximity is indeed an advantage. Furthermore, the geographical proximity of rising global actors to crisis-affected populations can be beneficial in advancing responses with regard to timeliness and cost effectiveness.

Financial capacities

7. Due to their financial capacities rising global donors can contribute significantly to bridging existing funding gaps. This financial ability therefore bears the potential of mitigating the impact of the economic crisis on the allocation of funds for response to humanitarian crises. That said, rising global donors do not want to be seen as simply filling the gap left by the economic crisis. Staying outside the OECD/DAC mechanisms can be perceived as comparative advantage, as donations can be directed without engaging in time-consuming procedures. However, this raises questions about the accountability and transparency of donation processes, which is commonly accepted as a priority. It is therefore likely that the future will see a greater focus on alternative mechanisms and alliances to enhance the tracking and supervision of donations outside the OECD/DAC framework. In addition, Muslim faith-based organisations (FBOs) can draw on private donations, which constitute a reliable, constant and significant source of funding.

Approaches to humanitarian action

Multisectoral approaches

8. Complex emergencies, the combination of environmental/natural disaster and violent conflict, pose vital questions to the relation of peace processes and humanitarian action. While the fertile relationship of peace and humanitarian action is obvious, linking peace processes with humanitarian action is contested. The imperative of designing humanitarian action in order not to fuel conflict is widely acknowledged. However the question remains if and to what extent humanitarian action can be tailored to benefit peace processes. Similar to the growing understanding of interrelations between development aid and humanitarian action, linkages between humanitarian action and conflict transformation and peace-building are being explored. Rising global powers fuel the existing discussion on whether humanitarian assistance can function in isolation by advocating a holistic view on causes for humanitarian suffering. Therefore approaches to humanitarian action often take the form of multisectoral approaches, spanning different areas and traditional divides of development aid, humanitarian action, conflict transformation and post-disaster rehabilitation.

Channelling of assistance

9. Non-DAC donors are channelling the bulk of their contributions bilaterally to affected governments as well as international organisations. In-kind contributions are an important dimension of non-DAC assistance. Still only a small proportion of the overall donation is channelled through multilateral organisations and pooled funding mechanisms. More concerted effort to track and report accurately to ensure donor confidence is understood commonly as necessity, while the OECD/DAC mechanism is perceived as being too rigid and exclusive to be able to incorporate non-DAC donors. Especially the dismissal of in-kind contributions is a hindrance to joining existent structures.

Partnership

10. The notion of donor and recipient is at times emblematic of the existing power disparity between the two groups of actors. In order to contest the concept of top-down approaches and promote discourses on eye-level, the notion of horizontal partnerships is strengthened. This encapsulates the understanding of mutual learning and teaching, which ensures equality within the respective relationship. Top-down approaches are increasingly contested by rising global powers who demand active involvement and ownership.

The way ahead

Identifying humanitarian challenges

The increasing complexity of the humanitarian landscape and the demand for effective coordination

11. As humanitarian organisations are proliferating and extending engagement in crises more humanitarian action is delivered worldwide. While the prevalence of humanitarian engagement can be seen as a beneficial development with regard to a broader acknowledgement for the necessity to alleviate human suffering, the growing amount of actors renders coordination tremendously complex.

The proliferation of armed non-state actors (ANSAs)

12. The growing amount and diversity of ANSAs operating in crisis contexts renders the process of gaining and maintaining access for humanitarian agencies increasingly difficult. Greater engagement with ANSAs is demanded to ensure the security of humanitarian personnel and beneficiaries, access to the affected population as well as quality of the assistance provided. This presumes adequate knowledge of the context as well as significant institutional capacities. Furthermore the politicization and instrumentalisation of humanitarian action, as well as changes in the international framework following the “Global War on Terror” affects the ability of humanitarian agencies to be perceived as neutral and independent. As a consequence many international humanitarian organisations are running programmes remotely, thus working increasingly with local implementing partners and staff.

New challenges to the international legal framework

13. Changes in the technology of warfare as well as the proliferation of ANSAs have serious implications for the international legal framework and the protection of civilians. The task of regulating the use of force through the stipulation of a detailed legal framework to stop violence against those who are not, or have stopped, partaking in conflict remains valid. The success of dealing with these new challenges will be shown in the way lessons are learned and implemented creatively and context-specifically. Thus there is a need to implement lessons-learned from past discourses to ensure the development of more adequate tools. Lack of respect for international humanitarian law (IHL) threatens the provision of assistance to and protection of affected populations. It is therefore imperative to create an environment conducive to the respect of

international law and humanitarian action.

Widening funding gaps

14. Despite an overall increase in financial contributions to humanitarian assistance, the funding gap within traditional international funding mechanisms is widening. Funding is likely to further decrease as the economic crisis affects the ability and willingness of governments to contribute. The lack of sustainable funding hampers the implementation of projects and threatens projects already underway. Funding for forgotten and protracted crises are an additional concern and further development of better adapted mechanisms is desirable to ensure humanitarian needs are met. The reluctance of global rising actors to channel funds through conventional international mechanisms further aggravates the problem.

The impact of climate change

15. The impact of climate change takes the shape of an increasing number and intensity of weather related hazards which enhance the likelihood of disasters. During the last 40 years, the frequency of natural disasters has been growing continuously. While vulnerability to disaster differs from country to country, recent experiences have demonstrated that technological and economic developments do not spare countries from being affected by disasters induced by climate change. The situation is further aggravated by urbanization and population growth. Therefore a greater commitment to effective disaster risk reduction (DRR) and cooperation on a global scale is needed to address these challenges.
16. Recommendations to address contemporary and future challenges include:
 - a. In order to address the contemporary and future challenges for humanitarian action it is necessary to transfer the experience of traditional actors to a new changed context and recognise the operational capacity of (re-)emerging donors.
 - b. Demonstrating openness to and during dialogue begins with paying attention to the terminology applied. The understanding of how (re-)emerging actors are defining themselves can be beneficial to enhance mutual understanding and contribute to the development of a common language facilitating the ability to work together.
 - c. The notion 'contextualise instead of generalise' should be guiding the design of interventions. As scenarios differ from country to country, general approaches are ill adapted to capture the reality on the ground. This concern, as well as the concept of the humanitarian principles and their operationalization, needs to be studied to a greater extent. More light needs to be shed on the meaning which different actors attach to the principles, on the part of both traditional and rising actors. Instead of adding yet another discussion about principled humanitarian action, it is necessary to introduce depth to the discussion by embracing a much wider and deeper understanding. This necessarily includes a careful analysis of the operational meaning of humanitarian principles in divergent contexts. Despite their enabling character, humanitarian principles are nowadays increasingly perceived by some as functioning as a straightjacket. Fostering and refreshing the understanding of humanitarian principles can be helpful to build greater adherence to them.
 - d. The need for smart programming using innovative tools and methods is ever increasing. This should be done on the basis of better needs analysis to identify not only needs but also capacities.
 - e. The working realms of development and humanitarian action are converging. The manifold causes of emergencies and their interdependence demand that greater attention is paid to systemic issues and long term strategies. To prevent recurrence of crises a concerted effort is needed that spans prevention, crisis intervention and post-conflict reconstruction. Building self-sufficient societies, decreasing of vulnerabilities and increasing of local institutional capacities to respond to crisis needs to be the goal.

- f. Humanitarian space has to be safeguarded and respect for humanitarian principles strengthened. Humanitarian action has to be designed closer to the needs of beneficiaries with practical mechanisms to address protection threats. The tension between protection of civilians and sovereignty continues and merits further debate. In order to strengthen cooperation, coordination and mutual learning, unnecessary competition between the traditional humanitarian community and re-emerging actors needs to be avoided. Diversity has to be understood as a vital opportunity to advance humanitarian action.
- g. While the understanding of, and the trust in, existing funding mechanisms need to be enhanced, they have to become more inclusive in nature. As many rising global actors do not perceive them as added value in the process of channelling funds, existing mechanisms have to increase their attractiveness vis-à-vis (re-)emerging donors (eg by recognition of in-kind contributions). More openness towards divergent mechanisms is as important as giving non-DAC donors space to develop their own approaches and improve funding mechanisms. Enhancing accountability and mechanisms to track and report the use of allocated funds accurately needs further commitment.
- h. Leveraging new technology and making use of innovative means can improve various areas of humanitarian action ranging from early warning to coordination and communication. Greater effort in the implementation of technological innovations should therefore be encouraged.
- i. International cooperation between diverse actors on a global and local level has to be strengthened. 'To act global but think local' demands international organisations to engage with local actors. The reconsideration of existing coordination mechanisms and the harmonizing of efforts on the ground bear the potential to increase the impact of aid. Efficient and timely communication is needed and more commitment and trust with regard to the use of international frameworks and systems is desirable. As the notions of interdependence and interoperability move more and more into the focus of cooperation efforts, recognising the comparative advantages of actors and adhering to standards become increasingly relevant. In particular, the concept of interoperability needs to be further explored and its meaning translated into concrete terms.
- j. In order to improve assistance, it is important not to separate one topic from the other but to recognise their interconnectivity and address them in a concerted effort.
- k. More engagement with the private sector is recommended and potential partnerships with private sectors involvement should be explored. How to meet the needs of people should remain the focus of cooperation.

Linking global and local responses

- 17. The importance of local and regional responses to humanitarian crises has become increasingly recognised. Local and regional organisations are among the first to respond to crises and enhancing their capacities with regard to crisis response is crucial in delivering timely assistance. However partnerships between international and local organisations in the past have not necessarily met the initial aspirations; criticisms of power asymmetry and a lack of respect for local knowledge, culture and capacities have been voiced.
- 18. Recommendations to address improving linkages in global and local responses include:
 - a. In order to ensure the functioning of local organisations during emergencies, it is necessary to begin well in advance with the process of strengthening capacities. The example of successful organisations has shown that early and long-term commitment during peace time and in advance of disasters is needed in order to accomplish the goal of decreasing vulnerabilities and increasing the ability to effectively respond to crisis.

- b. Capacity building projects need to support self-sufficiency and financial sustainability. In order to maintain the development of capacities, funding of capacity building initiatives need to be predictable and consistent. Local government ownership needs to be enhanced.
- c. Top-down approaches, preoccupied with the imposition of predesigned models, have to be avoided and a participatory approach during all phases of the project implemented. In order to develop local capacities to respond to crisis it is crucial to enter into a partnership of mutual learning in which capacity-building is viewed as a two way process.
- d. In order to increase the quality of the partnerships between international and local organisations as well as the success of capacity-building initiatives, five dimensions need to be reconsidered: development of personnel and capacity-building; credibility; communications and knowledge/information sharing; mentoring and coaching to build capacity and expertise; and division of labour and responsibilities.

Enhancing dialogue and strengthening mutual understanding

The question of consensus

- 19. The presence of new actors, donors and partnerships calls the established procedures of traditional actors into question. There is a need to find consensus and to build new bridges. However, in consideration of the growing number and contribution of a diverse set of humanitarian actors on the one side and the acknowledged importance of local and regional approaches to crises on the other, the question arises to what extent consensus between actors is achievable and desirable. While the heterogeneous nature of the humanitarian landscape is commonly acknowledged, the diversity of rising global actors contributing to humanitarian assistance still needs to be highlighted while recognising that the traditional system is by no means monolithic either.
- 20. As regional variations in approaches to humanitarian assistance become more visible and conflicting ideas are entering the discourse, an agreement on contested subjects and the full integration into a centralised system is less likely to take place. Continuous dialogue, the strengthening of commonalities and the awareness of divergent approaches might be the suitable path to achieve greater cooperation and coordination. Indeed, the identification of common challenges faced by various humanitarian actors can serve as a point of departure for the development of respective response strategies.

Obstacles to dialogue

- 21. It has become obvious that the shortcomings in dialogue have been substantial and mutual exchange is necessary, and should be welcomed, in order to look into potential areas of cooperation, to establish mutual trust and foster understanding. The process of engaging in dialogue has been hampered by a widespread feeling of being unwelcome in existing platforms. This perception has been fuelled by the reiteration of exclusive standards, the focus on English as a working language as well as a particular jargon, which often predetermines the path of the discourse
- 22. Recommendations to promote dialogue and strengthen mutual understanding include:
 - a. It is important to think about how platforms can inspire new dialogue. Using the example of this conference, annual informal conferences, hosting traditional and rising global actors, can facilitate the exchange of ideas and positions to increase mutual understanding and provide a fertile ground for informed debate.
 - b. As the Humanitarian Affairs Segment of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) has been acknowledged as a useful forum it should also be used to encourage further mutual exchange and dialogue.
 - c. Dialogue and partnership can be facilitated through using as a starting point regional

cooperation as well as cooperation between BRIC states.

- d. The World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) to be held in 2016 has major potential. It aims to establish a four way dialogue between: Member States, including both donors and affected governments; actors of the international humanitarian system; affected populations and associated partners. The process of consultation is beginning in 2014 and should be seen as an opportunity to enter into sustained dialogue with actors across sectors. The WHS intends to bring all four constituencies together to develop a roadmap for further engagement. The four key areas covered within the WHS include: humanitarian effectiveness, reducing vulnerabilities and managing risk; transformation through innovation; and serving the needs of people in conflict.
- e. The consultations preceding the WHS should be seen as an opportunity for dialogue. This requires the creation of an adequate space to develop different ideas and approaches.
- f. Although the notion of partnership is widely embraced, its actual form and meaning need to be outlined more concretely. If strategic, sustainable and long-term partnerships are envisioned more effort needs to be invested in giving substance to what is meant by partnering. This demands more commitment, openness and the willingness to engage in processes of mutual learning.

Conclusion

A whole set of recent trends affects the way humanitarian action is conducted and leads to questioning of conventional coordination, communication as well as organisational structures, mechanisms and procedures. It is an acknowledged fact that embracing non-traditional humanitarian actors, including the private sector, will change the dynamic of humanitarian action in the future. Changes in economic structure and the advent of new economic powers is leading to greater assertiveness and capabilities on the part of these powers. The changing landscape of humanitarian action is thus not a decision to be made but a process under way. The discourse therefore revolves not around the question whether the traditional humanitarian community is going to change, but how the new humanitarian landscape can make better use of this diversity encouraging complementarity rather than competition. Greater engagement between all actors bears great potential for finding solutions to persistent problems and addressing challenges in a concerted effort to advance humanitarian action. It is necessary to maintain the momentum of this debate and seek further opportunities to carry the process forward.

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Humanitarian Policy Group | October 2013

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